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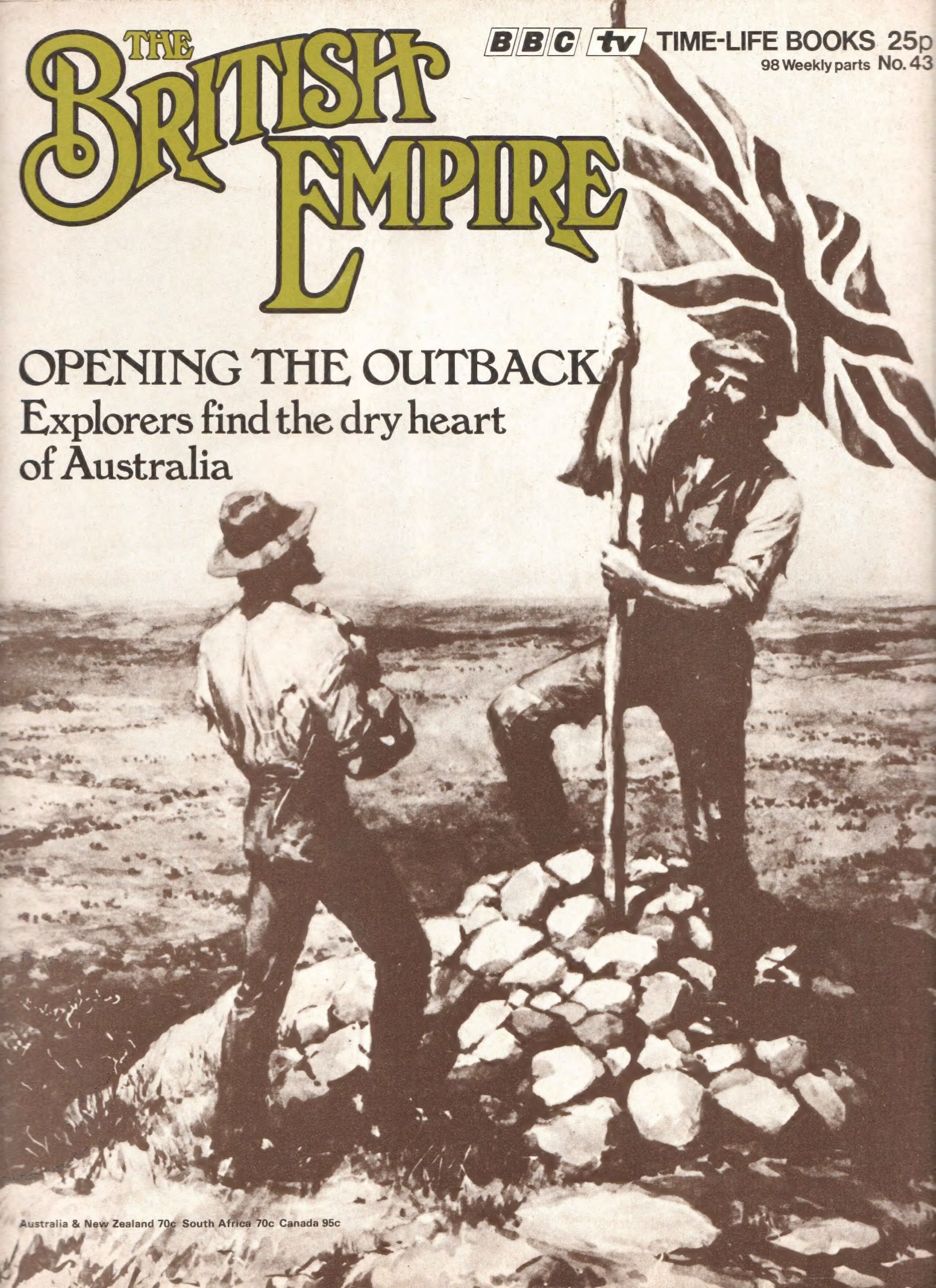
98 Weekly parts No. 43

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

OPENING THE OUTBACK

Explorers find the dry heart of Australia



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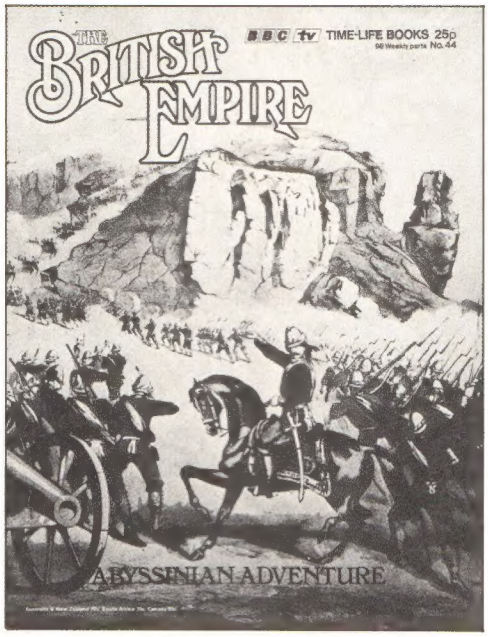
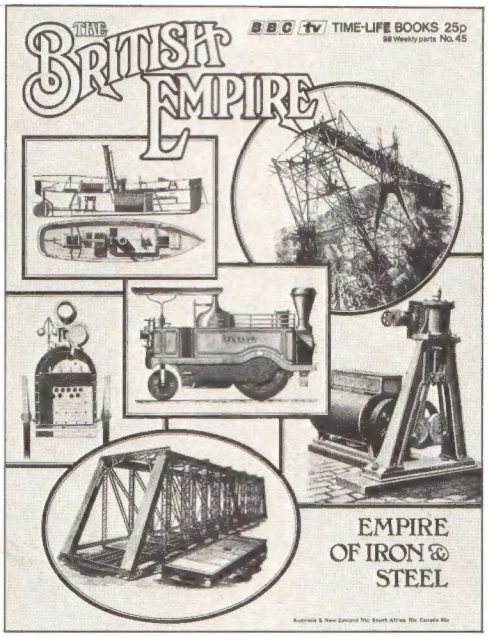




CONTENTS

1177. Opening the Outback
Heroic feats of early explorers carry the Union Jack west from Sydney, into the hinterland and across the trackless expanses of South and Western Australia.

1185. Picture Essay: The First Australians
Introduction to the Aborigines, an astonishingly primitive people with complex and at times thoroughly crude customs.

1194. The Great Exploration Race
The stories – that have become part of Australian folklore – relating the rival attempts to discover the secrets of central and northern Australia.

1198. Picture Essay: Disaster at Cooper's Creek
The tragicomedy of the most expensive and most disastrous expedition in the history of Australia.

1204. The End of the Dream
The explorers' day is done, settlers move in, everyday life replaces epic adventure.

Cover: To mark his arrival at the centre of the Australian continent in April, 1860, McDouall Stuart, a Scottish-immigrant explorer from Adelaide, proudly raises the Union Jack.

Harry, the first camel used in Australian exploration, grumpily follows J.A.Horrocks, one of the lesser explorers, into the parched interior in 1846.

OPENING THE OUTBACK

The great battles in Australian history were fought against the elements, against the deserts, the scorching sun and the sheer vastness of the continent. The heroes of those battles were the explorers, the Livingstones and Stanleys of Australia. In the 19th Century, a succession of these men – often wildly eccentric, almost always temperamental – pitted their wills and wits against the shimmering wastes of central Australia, peopled only by the nomadic Aborigines. Their ambitions were various: to discover an overland route, to serve the public interest or simply to taste adventure. Some succeeded, some failed disastrously; all suffered the torture of the wilderness. That, for many Australians, was their greatest achievement. But together they had unlocked the age-old secrets of Terra Australis Incognita, "The Unknown Land of the South"

By Barry Pree

The site chosen for Sydney proved, as the British government intended, a perfect setting for the convict colony founded in 1788. Beyond the town's beautiful, almost land-locked harbour lay the immensity of the Pacific; inland the area for 50 miles around was rugged, largely waterless scrubland; in the distance, closing round the settlement in an arch, were the Blue Mountains, part of the forbidding Great Dividing Range that stretches for 3,000 miles the length of Australia's eastern coast.

For 25 years none of the first white Australians ventured beyond these peaks except, perhaps, a few runaway convicts who never returned to tell of what they had found.

As a result, the lands beyond the Blue Mountains took hold of the imaginations of the new Australians and became an obsession. Perhaps behind the mountains lay great rivers providing an easy route overland towards China, or fields as soft and gentle as those in southern England, or some fabulous El Dorado. Was the interior a vast desert? Or did it contain an inland sea to rival the Mediterranean? Was the whole continent divided in two by as yet undiscovered straits?

Even in 1820, when men had at least glimpsed the view beyond the Blue Mountains, the land beyond the new horizon, towards the centre of the continent, was still blank – the "ghastly blank" as it soon became known.

In the next 50 years, a handful of men – Stuart, Mitchell, Grey, Eyre, Leichhart, Sturt, Burke, Wills, legendary names in Australian history – worked into the interior from both north and south, unfolding the contours and essential nature of nearly 3 million square miles of land previously unseen by white men.

In the early days the reasons for exploration were severely practical. It was a matter of sheer survival. The penal settlement at Sydney often seemed to be on the verge of total ruin: trapped by its natural barriers, it was terribly vulnerable to the frequent floods and droughts; its crops were poor and often attacked by plant diseases, and its livestock sickly. Many of its inhabitants died of starvation, more from malnutrition. Succeeding governors realized that if the enterprise were to be permanent it had to be able to support itself; a way across the Blue Mountains had to be found, and "the promised land" that everyone believed existed there settled.

The way was shown by three young men, Gregory Blaxland, William Lawson and William Wentworth (whose later career as a politician and one of the main agitators for self-government earned him the title of "father of his country"). In May, 1813, they set out on the most ambitious assault on the mountains that had yet been undertaken. Three weeks and 58 miles later they reached "a high hill, the shape of a sugar loaf" (now called Mount York). From the summit of the hill "they descried all around, forest or grassland, sufficient in extent, in their opinion, to support the stock of the colony for the next thirty years." It was a magnificent sight, according to the youthful Wentworth, "opening like Canaan on rapt Israel's view." In comparison to the feats of exploration that were to come it was a diminutive achievement, but it *was* the first.

A few months later, the surveyor George Evans followed the same route and then struck out farther until he reached the rich Bathurst Plains beyond, which were "covered with the finest grass and intermixed with the white daisy as in England." The hinterland was open, and the colony's immediate survival assured.

Other explorers followed in rapid succession: reaching the fertile plains west of Bathurst; tracing the course of the Lachlan and Macquarie rivers, which disintegrated into unnavigable marshes; crossing the river later to be named the Murray and penetrating Victoria through some of the best country yet seen; probing north of Sydney to the Darling Downs (named after the then Governor, Sir Ralph Darling), the greatest area of pastoral lands on the continent.

Wherever the explorers went, "the overlanders" – free settlers and ex-convicts driving their flocks before them – followed in quick pursuit, pouring by the hundreds into the valleys and plains in search of "a good run."

The inexorable push to the west took the explorers ever deeper into "the ghastly blank"; and, they believed, ever closer towards the edge of the green inland sea.

No one was so utterly convinced of the existence of this sea as Captain Charles Sturt. Born in India in 1795, the son of a judge in Bengal, Sturt had served with distinction in Canada, France and Ireland before sailing for New South Wales in 1826 in charge of a convict guard. He was a tall, rather gaunt young man with a fine and sensitive appearance and manner. Like few newcomers before him, he was genuinely interested in the country in which he found himself, and he quickly acquired an intelligent appreciation of its landscape and native people, its strange animals and plants. Soon after his arrival at Sydney he became Governor Darling's Military Secretary; in 1829 he was the Governor's natural choice to lead an expedition to find a solution to "the problem of the rivers."

A solution to this problem had become a matter of paramount importance for the continued prosperity of the colony. In the preceding three years the colonists had suffered the worst drought they had yet experienced and many of them were ruined. Large rivers dried up; temperatures of 129 degrees in the shade were recorded. Sturt noted in his *Journal*: "The surface of the earth became so parched that minor vegetation ceased upon it. . . . Men at length began to despond under so alarming a visitation. It almost appeared as if the Australian sky were never to be again traversed by a cloud." Land watered by permanent rivers rather than by unpredictable rains had to be found, and, Governor Darling decided, the key to the solution was the Murrumbidgee River, discovered eight years before.

Sturt's expedition, the first of the truly epic journeys of Australian exploration, left Sydney on November 3, 1829. The plan was to follow the Murrumbidgee to the Murray, then travel along the northern boundary of present-day Victoria to the coast of what was soon to be South Australia, 900 miles to the west. The expedition had been carefully planned and well provided for: there were ample supplies and a ship had been sent ahead round the coat to lie up and wait for the party in St. Vincent Gulf near present-day Adelaide.

Sturt had a whaleboat constructed in sections which were hauled overland on

On the map, the routes of the explorers look like hesitant meanderings. In fact, despite casualties in the deserts, most expeditions reached their goals and by the 1860s the "ghastly blank" was filled.

drays the 90 miles to the river. It took the party nearly eight weeks to reach a part of the river where the flow was deep and constant enough for safe embarkation. The 27-foot whaleboat was assembled, a skiff to carry provisions was built, and a week later, on January 7, 1830, Sturt and his crew – his servant, an assistant, two soldiers and three convicts – set off down the river.

The first mishap occurred on the third day out. As they proceeded down the river, its channel gradually contracted, and became partly blocked by immense trees that had been swept down it by floods. Navigation was dangerous and intricate. Suddenly the whaleboat glanced against a hidden rock and within seconds the skiff on tow behind, carrying almost all the party's stores, turned turtle and sank in swirling water. It took two days to raise it and salvage the supplies.

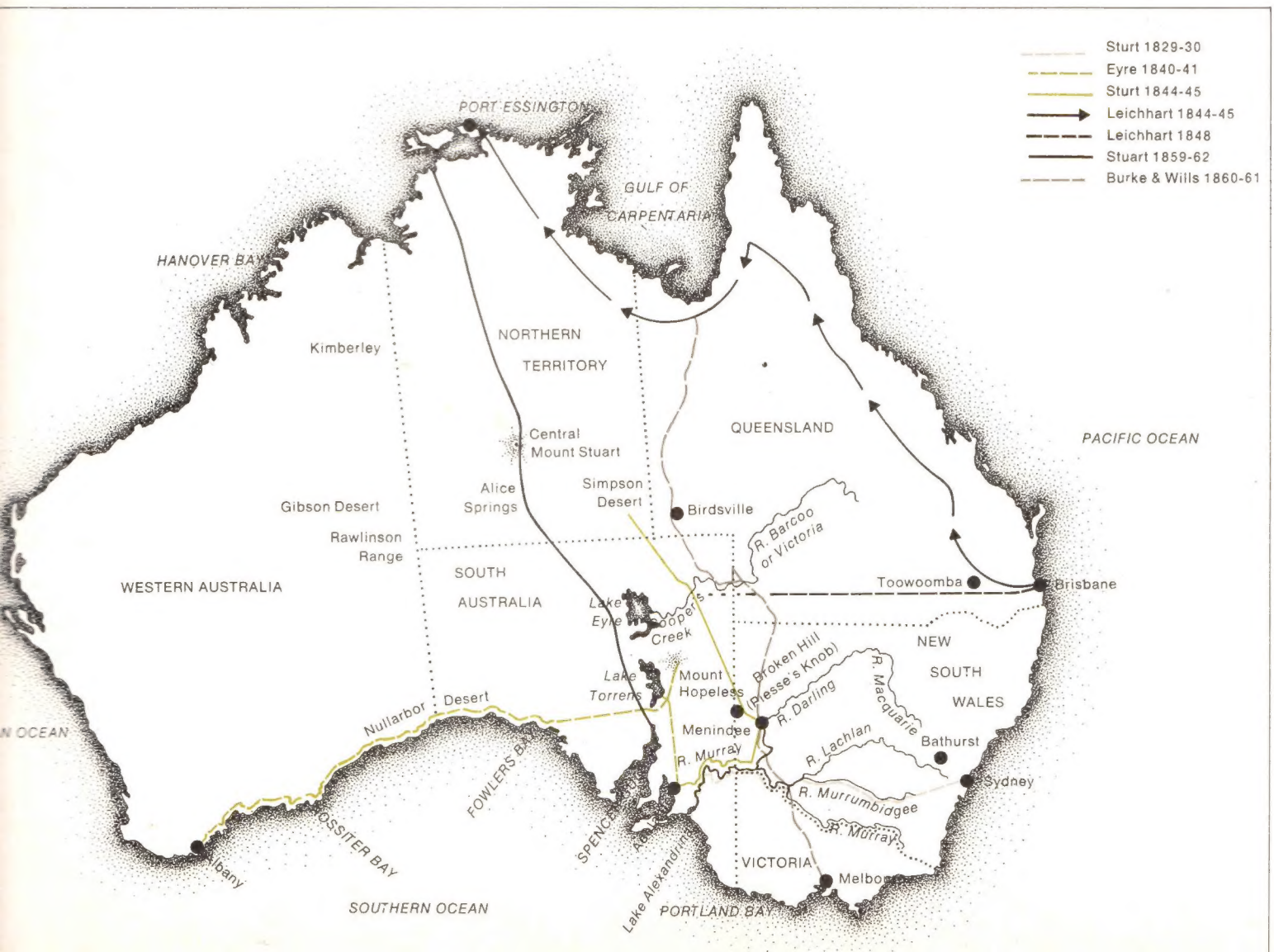
While the men were camped on shore repairing the boat and skiff, they were constantly aware of another potential danger: Aborigines. When the expedition started out again down the river, the natives followed along the banks. As the river narrowed, the Europeans found themselves face to face with armed Aboriginal warriors – almost within touching distance. Their intentions had not yet been declared, but they were becoming increasingly threatening.

On January 23, Sturt observed "a vast concourse of natives," painted for war: "Some who had marked their ribs, and thighs, and faces with white pigment, looked like skeletons; others were daubed over with red and yellow ochre, and their bodies shone with grease."

Sturt sped the boat forwards but just as it seemed that he and his crew had escaped a terrible conflict, the river widened and the boat's progress was hampered by difficult shoals. Here a large sandbank jutted out into midstream from the shore and some 600 Aborigines massed along it for an attack. The explorers grimly prepared their weapons.

But just as Sturt raised his gun, his finger on the trigger, an extraordinary thing happened for which Sturt never found an explanation. There was a sudden hush among the Aborigines, and their attention switched to the other side of the river. Sturt looked over his shoulder and saw four more Aborigines racing towards the water. One of them plunged into the stream and struggled to the sandbank where he grabbed the chief Sturt was about to shoot: "Seizing him by the throat, he pushed him backwards, and forcing all who were in the water upon the bank, he trod its margin with a vehemence and an agitation that were exceedingly striking. At one moment pointing to the boat, at another shaking his clenched hand in the faces of the most forward and stamping with passion on the sand. . . . For my own part I was overwhelmed with astonishment, and in truth stunned and confused; so singular, so unexpected, and so strikingly providential had been our escape."

No incident in Sturt's career reveals as much of his remarkable character as that which followed. Instead of making full use of this God-given chance to escape, he ordered his men to stand by in case the man who had saved them needed assistance. Sturt waited until it became clear that the Aborigine was a man of authority among his fellows and in com-



plete command of the situation; then he stepped ashore, unarmed. "It was my first care to call for our friend, and to express to him as well as I could how much we stood indebted to him, at the same time that I made him a suitable present. But to the chiefs of the tribes I positively refused all gifts, notwithstanding their earnest solicitations."

The party set off again, the Aborigines, still suspicious, always close behind.

For many more miles the river continued in a clumsy, laborious course. Sometimes the men had to get out of the boat and drag it over broad shoals to the next stretch of deep water, and there were parts of the river so dense with tangled reeds that it took hours of tremendous exertion to move the boat a few yards.

But soon the Murrumbidgee disappeared into the wide and swifter waters of a new river, which Sturt named the Murray. He was confident that the worst had been overcome. "I directed the Union Jack to be hoisted," he wrote later, "and . . . we all stood up in the boat, and gave three distinct cheers. . . . The eye of every native had been fixed upon that noble flag, at all times a beautiful object, and to them a novel one. . . . They had until that moment, been particularly loquacious, but the sight of that flag and the sound of our voices hushed the tumult, and while they were still lost in astonishment, the boat's head was speedily turned, the sail was sheeted home, both wind and current were in our favour, and we vanished from them with a rapidity that surprised even ourselves."

But the worst was yet to come.

Sturt had expected the river to continue in the direction of present-day Adelaide and end in the sea in or near St. Vincent Gulf. There he would board the ship waiting to take the party back to Sydney. Instead, on February 9, 1830, he discovered that the Murray terminated in a lake, now Lake Alexandrina, almost on the coast south-east of Adelaide. It is about 50 miles across and it took the last strength of the whaleboat's crew to row across it.

On the other side, from a hill, Sturt took in the desperate situation in which he now found himself. The expedition was trapped: there appeared to be a channel leading out of the lake into the sea, but at this time it was completely blocked by heavy sandbanks. Even if they managed to get the boat through, they would have to drag it across about three miles of flats to the sea. Once there, two rows of impossibly dangerous breakers would have to be negotiated before the boat could be floated. Sturt realized that the party was stranded in a deep bight now Encounter Bay. They would not be seen by any ship entering the bay (which itself was unlikely); they were not equipped to travel overland eastwards; and the men were too weak to cross the ranges even farther to the west, to the coast. There was only one alternative: they had to go back the way they had come.

The men accepted Sturt's decision in utter silence: as much in awe of the man's courage, as in horror of what they now faced – 1,000 miles upstream, rowing *against* the current.

Sturt set out "without hopes of our eventual safety." Much of the original provisions, calculated initially for only a single journey, had been lost in accidents or spoiled by the intense heat. Rations were reduced to a meagre three-quarters of a pound of flour a day. Even on the first day, Sturt recorded in his journal that his men were weak "from the poverty of the diet and great and sustained bodily fatigue."

They rowed for six weeks, from dawn to seven or nine at night, and on one day, for 11 hours without a break to escape continual harassment from Aborigines. Their hands were raw with running sores; their backs, covered by bare tatters, were blackened by the sun; their legs were stiff, rigid with pain; they were hardly alive at all.

"The men lost the proper and muscular jerk with which they once made the waters foam and the oars bend," Sturt wrote later. "Their whole bodies swung with an awkward and laboured motion. Their arms appeared to be nerveless, their faces became haggard, their persons emaciated, their spirits wholly sunk; nature was so completely overcome, that from mere exhaustion they frequently fell asleep during their painful and almost ceaseless exertions.

"I became captious and found fault where there was no occasion, and lost the equilibrium of my temper, in contemplating the condition of my companions. No murmur, however, escaped them, nor did a complaint reach me that was intended to indicate that they had done all that they could do. I frequently heard them in their tent, when they thought I had dropped asleep, complaining of severe pains, and of great exhaustion. 'I must tell the captain tomorrow,' one of them would say, 'that I can pull no more.' But the morrow came, and they pulled on."

Incredibly, they survived. One man broke down: "He related the most extraordinary tales, and fidgeted eternally while in the boat," wrote Sturt. "I felt it necessary, therefore, to relieve him from the oars." But when the party reached its former depot on the banks of the Murrumbidgee, two men were still strong enough to volunteer for a 90-mile trek overland in search of help. A relief-party arrived back at the depot just as Sturt was handing out the last rounds of flour to his companions.

Sturt had discovered and charted a great river system, and it had a dramatic effect on the colony's immediate development. As a direct result of his glowing reports of the country he had seen, the British province of South Australia was founded in 1834 as an experimental free colony without convict settlers.

The first immigrants arrived two years later, and soon the country realized "the happy expectations" Sturt had held for it: "Its plains and its rich and lovely valleys . . . were studded with cottages and cornfields; the very river [the Murray] which had appeared to me so misplaced was made the high road to connect the eastern and southern shores of a mighty continent."

Sturt's reports of 1830 received further confirmation when Major Thomas Livingstone Mitchell explored the rich western regions of Victoria in 1836 and nicknamed them *Australia Felix* (Happy Australia). Mitchell was highly gifted and an erudite scholar, but he was also dogmatic, narrow-minded, and crudely ambitious, spurred on only by a jealous envy of the achievements of others, particularly of Sturt.

Mitchell's strife-torn Victoria expedition typified his stormy journeys. As he travelled inland, Mitchell set an ambush for a tribe of hostile Aborigines, killing about 30 of them. He had to face an official inquiry on his return to Sydney,

but during the proceedings he never for a moment shed any of his natural arrogance. "Such instances of necessary chastisement with the Aborigines have occurred wherever the colonisation of New Holland [Australia] has extended," he said, adding: "The matter was for me to consider and *ME* alone." He was censured, but cleared of ultimate responsibility, largely because the discovery of *Australia Felix*, for which he was knighted, had made him a hero.

When Mitchell arrived at Portland Bay on the coast of Victoria, he was very much surprised to see a ship at anchor in the harbour and find the rudimentary beginnings of a settlement. Two brothers named Henty had come over from Tasmania with their flocks and herds about two years before. They had "claimed" and fenced off about 20,000 acres – quite illegally, of course. Farther along the coast to the east, on the site of the future city of Melbourne, were the first tents of another new settlement, the John Batman Port Phillip Association, which had "purchased" about 100,000 acres of good land from Aborigine tribes in 1835; and elsewhere, dotted along the coast, were smaller, lonelier enterprises.

They were not alone for long. "The Major's route" threw Victoria open to the land-hungry squatters of New South Wales, and by 1845 the best of the available land had been claimed.

With the immediate needs of the colonists well satisfied, the attention of the explorers turned once again to "the ghastly blank," this time more because of its mystery than its potential.

First off the mark was a 24-year-old overlander, Edward John Eyre, an immigrant from Yorkshire, who at noon on June 18, 1840, galloped out of Adelaide in "a heart-stirring and inspiring scene" at the head of the first direct expedition to the centre. He took with him as his most prized possession a Union Jack sewn by the ladies of the city. Sturt, who supported him in his venture, had presented the flag to Eyre with instructions "to carry it to the centre of the mighty continent, there to leave it as a sign to the savage that the footsteps of civilised men had penetrated so far."

Originally, the expedition had been mounted with the intention of finding an overland stock route from South Australia to Western Australia. But Eyre had already explored what is now called Eyre Peninsula, which bounded Spencer Gulf to the west, and found it quite impracticable for the transit of stock. He therefore decided that the north represented a better proposition for the discovery of a good country, or an available route across the continent.

No one doubted that Eyre would succeed. He was a convincing figure. Slender, with huge dark eyes and a mass of black bushy hair, he looked even younger than his years. But he was widely experienced, his sincerity was unquestionable and his limitless energy infectious; and he was fully supported by his distinguished mentor, Sturt. Nevertheless, his expedition was a failure.

For three months the party floundered in the arid wastes 400 miles north of Adelaide between the great shallow, swampy lakes, Lake Torrens and what was later named Lake Eyre. The land around was barren – there was little water and not much feed for the animals – and it seemed to be demonically enchanted by mirages. Often Eyre rode out towards what he believed to be fine expanses of water, only to find himself lost in sand-dunes. He came to the conclusion that the haunting "broad glittering strips" on the horizon was part of a giant, horse-shoe-shaped lake.

He tried to cross Lake Torrens, certain that he could discern the outline of a shore on the other side, not more than eight miles away. But the brilliant white salt crust of the lake gave way and his horses sank to their bellies in soft mud.

"From the extraordinary and deceptive appearances, caused by mirage and refraction," he wrote, "it was impossible to tell what to make of sensible objects, or what to believe on the evidence of vision, for upon turning back to retrace our steps to the eastward, a vast sheet of water appeared to intervene between us and the shore," Eyre wrote, "whilst the Mount Deception ranges [a name which, like Mount Hopeless, Eyre left behind in the desert to indicate the weight of his despair], which I knew to be at least thirty-five miles distance, seemed to rise out of the bed of the lake itself, the mock waters of which were lapping their base, and reflecting the inverted outline of their rugged summits."

Finally, Eyre called a halt to the expedition. He was full of a deep sense of guilt for the expenses that had been wasted on his ambition; and he was determined to find a way of "making amends for past failure": he would follow the original plan of the expedition and find a crossing to the west, regardless of the hazards.

He sent word of his change of plan to Adelaide and had a boat with supplies dispatched from there 400 miles round the coast to Fowler's Bay, where he arrived shortly afterwards, on the coast of the Great Australian Bight.

He had no illusions about what he was to undertake. The route he proposed to follow stretched 1,000 miles along the coast from Fowler's Bay to Albany at the tip of Western Australia. The cliffs of the rugged southern coast fell in a sheer drop of some 300 feet into a wild sea; the land behind the cliffs was hard and stony, here and there spotted with huge patches of impossibly thick mallee scrub. Farther inland the desert sand began; there was no evidence of water, and little of animal life; the sky was empty. Friends in Adelaide wrote to him urging him to abandon the project which they considered to be "little less than madness," but Eyre felt duty bound.

For several weeks during the last months of the year – at the height of the Australian summer, with temperatures reaching 113 degrees – Eyre made exploratory probes round Fowler's Bay, covering distances as far as 150 miles from his depot. At one point on his planned route, he set up a cache of food.

Then in January he disbanded the entire party that was to accompany him on the expedition, having decided that it was too large for the task. He kept with him only his overseer, John Baxter, and three Aborigines.

The party set out on February 25, 1841, with nine horses, a pony and a foal, and six sheep. The heat of the day was unbearable, while at night they froze. They were constantly attacked by huge grey blood-sucking flies, the only creatures that lived in a sea of sand that "penetrated into our clothes, hair, eyes, and ears; our provisions covered over with it, and our blankets half buried when we lay down at nights."

"Our flour [which was buried at the cache established two months previously] was calculated for nine weeks, at an allowance of six pounds of flour weekly, with a proportionate quantity of tea and sugar." But they arrived at the cache only in time to witness a group of Aborigines spilling the flour on to the sand and breaking open a precious flask of water that had been buried with it. By March 10, the party was suffering from desperate thirst: "We had been four days and nights without a drop for our horses. It was clear that, unless I discovered water early in the morning, the whole of our horses must perish; whilst it would be very doubtful if we could succeed even in saving our own lives," Eyre wrote.

As it happened, he underestimated the endurance of both his animals and his men. A week later the party was still intact, but, Eyre recorded, there were still 800 miles to be covered and supplies had been reduced to three sheep and 142 pounds of flour. Eyre began to lighten the loads. Guns and ammunition were thrown away, saddles were left like stumps in the sand, coats and boots strewn across the dunes. To Eyre's greatest regret, even a copy of Captain Sturt's *Expeditions* was jettisoned.

By March 30 they were desperate for water, but that night there was a particularly heavy dew. "I took a sponge," wrote Eyre, "and went to try and collect some of the dew which was hanging in spangles upon the grass and shrubs. Brushing these with the sponge, I squeezed it, when saturated, into a quart pot, which in an hour's time I filled with water. The native boys, by using a handful of fine grass, collected in the same way about a quart among them. We made it into a tea, divided it among the party, and never was a meal more truly relished, although we ate the last morsel of bread we had with us and none knew when he might again enjoy a drink of water."

Soon after, a horse was killed and Eyre tried to "jerk" the flesh by cutting it into strips and drying it in the sun and wind. But the weather turned suddenly cool, and the damp air rotted the meat: an indispensable animal had been wasted.

By mid April, the expedition had become a nightmare without meaning: its purpose had long since been fulfilled. The route was, as Eyre had always believed, quite impracticable for the transit of stock; now, when it was too late to turn back, reaching Western Australia had become a matter of sheer survival.

The last sheep was slaughtered: the Aborigines stole some of the meat, and when Eyre put them on special rations as punishment, two of them ran off into the bush. They came back a few days later, driven by hunger, but full of resentment – resentment that within two weeks was to lead to the most dramatic episode of the journey.

On April 29, Eyre was watching over the horses as they searched for grass at some distance from the camp when he was startled by a sudden flash, followed by the report of a gun. He hurried towards the camp and 100 yards from it met Wylie, the youngest of the Aborigines, running towards him in great alarm crying out "Oh Massa, oh Massa, come here!" Upon reaching the encampment he was horror-struck to find Baxter lying on the ground "weltering in the blood and in the last agonies of death."

The two Aborigine boys who had earlier run away had shot Baxter as he slept and disappeared into the night, taking with

On his 1,000-mile trip along the south coast in 1841, Edward Eyre's life was saved only by this chance meeting with the captain of a passing ship.

them guns and ammunition, the last of the mutton, all of the bread, most of the tea and sugar, and worst of all, the water.

Eyre sat by Baxter through the night, his gun in hand, its sights fixed on the boy Wylie: his description in his journal of the terror he felt is one of the most famous passages in the records of Australian exploration:

"The frightful, the appalling truth now burst upon me, that I was alone in this desert. . . . The horrors of my situation glared upon me in such startling reality as for an instant almost to paralyse the mind. At the dead hour of night, in the wildest and most inhospitable wastes of Australia, with the fierce wind raging in unison with the scene of violence before me, I was left with a single native, whose fidelity I could not rely upon, and for aught I knew might be in league with the other two, who perhaps were even now lurking about with the view of taking away my life as they had done that of the overseer. Three days had passed since we left the last water, and it was very doubtful when we might find any more. Six hundred miles of country had to be traversed before I could hope to obtain the slightest aid, whilst I knew that not a single drop of water, or an ounce of flour, had been left by these murderers."

The next day Eyre tried to dig a grave for Baxter, but the earth was too hard. He left the body enshrouded in a blanket and departed with Wylie and several horses. The animals, too weak to be ridden, could, in a last resort, be eaten.

In fact, the situation was not quite so desperate as he feared. The two Aborigines had overlooked about 40 pounds of flour and four gallons of water in their flight out of the camp. But in the days that followed, and the eternal nights, Eyre could not rid himself of the fear that the Aborigines would return to claim what they had forgotten, or that Wylie would kill him for his share of the rations and thus gain a few extra days of life.

For the next month, day after day, the two men trudged through the desert, existing only on a handful of flour and a cupful of water each in the mornings and afternoons. Sometimes they literally hung on to each other, each fearful that if he fell he would never get up again, for, as Eyre said, he would often have gladly "laid down and slept for ever. Nothing but a strong sense of duty prevented me from giving way to this pleasing but fatal indulgence."

One of the horses was killed. After cutting off about 100 pounds of meat, and hanging it in strips to dry, Eyre handed over to Wylie the residue of the carcase – feet, entrails, flesh, skeleton – to cook and consume as he pleased. Wylie took full advantage of this chance to indulge his extraordinary capacity to gorge himself when food was available. "He roasted about 20 lbs. to feast upon during the night. Every time I awoke . . . I found him up and gnawing away at his meat."

Some days later, when Eyre shot a kangaroo, he recorded that Wylie ate the entrails, paunch, liver, lungs, tail, and two hind legs, leaving only the hide, apparently in case of need later. Soon afterwards, Wylie found a dead penguin on the beach. No longer feeling any need to stint himself, he took up the kangaroo hide, singed off the hair, ate it and wound up this meal by swallowing the skin of the penguin. Then, for once he admitted that his belly was full; he made a little fire, and lay down to sleep, contented.

Charles Sturt (standing) takes aim at some hostile Aborigines on a sandbank during the epic expedition in 1830 when he charted the river system of south-east Australia.

By now, however, 700 miles west of their starting-point at Fowler's Bay, the worst seemed over. The character of the country had begun to change: there was fresh rainwater caught in the holes of granite rocks; there were more animals in the bush and birds in the sky.

Then, on June 2, Eyre sighted a ship at anchor in the Bight and successfully hailed it from the cliffs: it was a whaling vessel, the *Mississippi*.

Eyre and Wylie were taken on board, and they remained on the ship for 12 days until they were reasonably restored to health and strength.

Although he could have ended his journey there and then, Eyre was by now obsessed with the need to see his undertaking through to its end. He decided to press on to Albany, 280 miles away.

He and Wylie set out again on June 14, the surviving pack-horses loaded down with provisions from the ship. "We entered upon the continuation of our undertaking," Eyre recalled, "with a spirit, an energy, and a confidence, that we had long been strangers to."

Wylie, in particular, was overjoyed, for he was approaching his home territory. "Almost in fancy he was there, amongst his friends; he could think, or talk, of nothing else, and actually complimented me upon the successful way in which I had conducted him to the end of his journey."

There were still many hazards to be overcome, the worst being – ironically – rain: it was now the wet season. "The rain was falling in torrents, and we had not a dry shred about us, whilst the whole country through which we passed had . . . become an almost uninterrupted chain of puddles. For a great part of the way we walked up to our ankles in water."

Not far from Albany they encountered an Aborigine. Wylie, with shrieks of delight, recognized him, and the friend's cry of astonishment and joy echoed through the hills to the little township of Albany. "For an instant there was a silence almost as death," Eyre wrote. "Then a single repetition of that wild, joyous cry, a confused hum of many voices, a hurrying to and fro of human feet, and the streets were now alive with natives – men, women and children, old and young, rushing rapidly up the hill to welcome the wanderer on his return and to receive their lost one almost from the grave." The whole town turned out, and Eyre and Wylie were borne aloft in triumph, each by his own people. It was July 7, almost four months since they had set out from Fowler's Bay.

The young Yorkshireman became a hero, a legend in his own lifetime. It was his courage that was celebrated; his failure to penetrate the north and the negative reports on the country he had crossed on his trek lost significance.

Eyre remains one of the strangest figures in the history of the Empire. For the young Australian hero was to become known as the "Butcher of Jamaica" and "Old 'Angsman" in 1865. He was then Governor of Jamaica in the Caribbean, and he put down a Negro rebellion by declaring martial law and hanging not only the leader of the uprising but also killing or executing 439 other Negroes and flogging some 600 others. Humanitarians in England tried to have Eyre arraigned for murder and tremendous controversy ensued. A Royal Commission eventually reported that Eyre had acted correctly, but with unnecessary rigour. He died in Tavistock, Devon, in 1901, aged 86.

As a result of Eyre's failure, the "ghastly blank" had kept its secrets. The challenge was taken up once again – and by none other than Charles Sturt. On August 15, 1844, he set out eastwards from Adelaide, travelling parallel to the Murray River, carrying a boat in which he hoped to sail the great inland sea. It was his last journey into "the heartless desert."

Sturt discovered interesting country on the way north. At a camp near Broken Hill, he noticed and reported "veins of metal in the rock around." It was the first indication of the fabulously rich silver-mines that were to be opened up in the 1880s. Later, Broken Hill was found to be equally rich in lead and zinc and, more recently, in uranium.

Moving on northwards from Broken Hill, Sturt saw country of "salty spinifex [a spiny, coarse grass] and sand ridges driving for hundreds of miles into the very heart of the interior as if they would never end." The temperature was sometimes 132 degrees in the shade and 157 degrees in the sun. He discovered a stony desert covered with flints as long as six inches and quite sharp enough to cripple men and horses.

Finally, in September, 1845, 400 miles from Broken Hill, he entered what is now known as Simpson Desert. It was clearly utterly impenetrable with the resources he had with him. "The spinifex was close and matted," he wrote, "and the horses were obliged to lift their feet straight up to avoid its sharp points. From the summit of a sandy undulation . . . we saw that the ridges extended northwards in parallel lines beyond the range of vision. . . . To the eastward and westward they succeeded each other like the waves of the sea. The sand was of a deep red colour, and a bright line of it marked the top of each ridge, amidst the sickly pink and glaucous coloured vegetation around." He turned back with a feeling of bitter disappointment rendered more acute by his belief that he was within 150 miles of the centre of the continent. Actually, he was 400 miles from the centre.

Sturt returned to England in 1853, where his journals of discovery had made him famous. He died there in 1869, the most respected Australian explorer.

During all these years, the theory of great rivers leading to a sea at the centre had never been entirely abandoned. Sturt had charted the river system of the south; and now explorers began to believe that there was an equally large system in the north, and that it led to the centre of the continent.

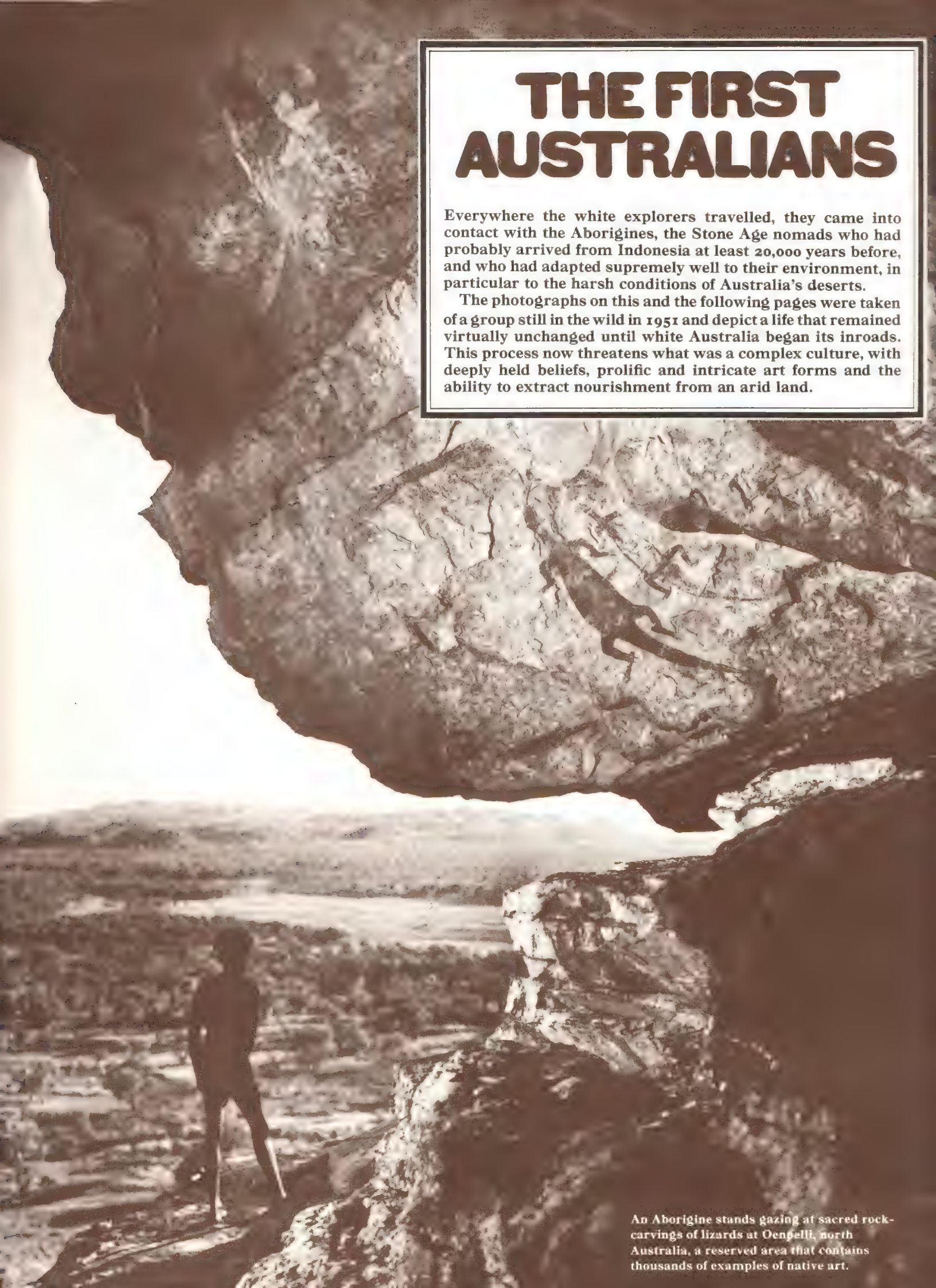
In the late 1830s, one of these explorers, George Grey, had set out from Hanover Bay on the western coast of the continent at the head of two ill-prepared and ill-equipped expeditions in search of the rivers. Grey was a controversial figure never granted much recognition: an intellectual, a scholar with a passionate interest in archaeology and the arts, and a declared champion of oppressed, particularly of black peoples, he did not fit into the heroic mould.

In fact, Grey discovered ten rivers, two mountain ranges and three extensive districts of good country. His most important discovery, historically, was a sacred Aboriginal shrine made up of caves covered with ancient rock-paintings (which were rediscovered only a century later), of which he made striking copies accompanied with vivid descriptions.

THE FIRST AUSTRALIANS

Everywhere the white explorers travelled, they came into contact with the Aborigines, the Stone Age nomads who had probably arrived from Indonesia at least 20,000 years before, and who had adapted supremely well to their environment, in particular to the harsh conditions of Australia's deserts.

The photographs on this and the following pages were taken of a group still in the wild in 1951 and depict a life that remained virtually unchanged until white Australia began its inroads. This process now threatens what was a complex culture, with deeply held beliefs, prolific and intricate art forms and the ability to extract nourishment from an arid land.



An Aborigine stands gazing at sacred rock-carvings of lizards at Oenpelli, north Australia, a reserved area that contains thousands of examples of native art.

Stone-Age Nomads

Aborigines inhabited every part of Australia, from the barren deserts to the rich riverlands. Faced with an unreliable climate that discouraged settled farming, they developed an extremely efficient nomadic way of life.

Wandering the wilds in small groups, they turned food-gathering into a fine art. In addition to a staple diet of the more straightforward types of food – like kangaroos, emus, fish and eggs – they feasted on such delicacies as witchetti grubs (fatty moth larvae), honey-ants, water-lilies, snails, tortoises, lizards and snakes. The women were highly skilled in locating underground yams, thus completing a diet that was surprisingly varied and highly nutritious.

Every evening, when they reached a new camp-site, the group shared out the day's bag of food, eating it raw or lightly cooking it over their fires.

A successful hunter dangles a still-struggling goanna over the fire. Either men or women may cook small game, but the ceremonial cooking of large animals or birds is entirely a masculine affair.

A woman sits close to the ever-present fire, her child on her shoulder. On the coldest nights, the Aborigines sleep so close to the fire that they often roll in.

A girl sleeps under a conical *ngainmara* mat which is both a symbolic womb used in sacred ritual and, more prosaically, a shield against rain and mosquitoes.

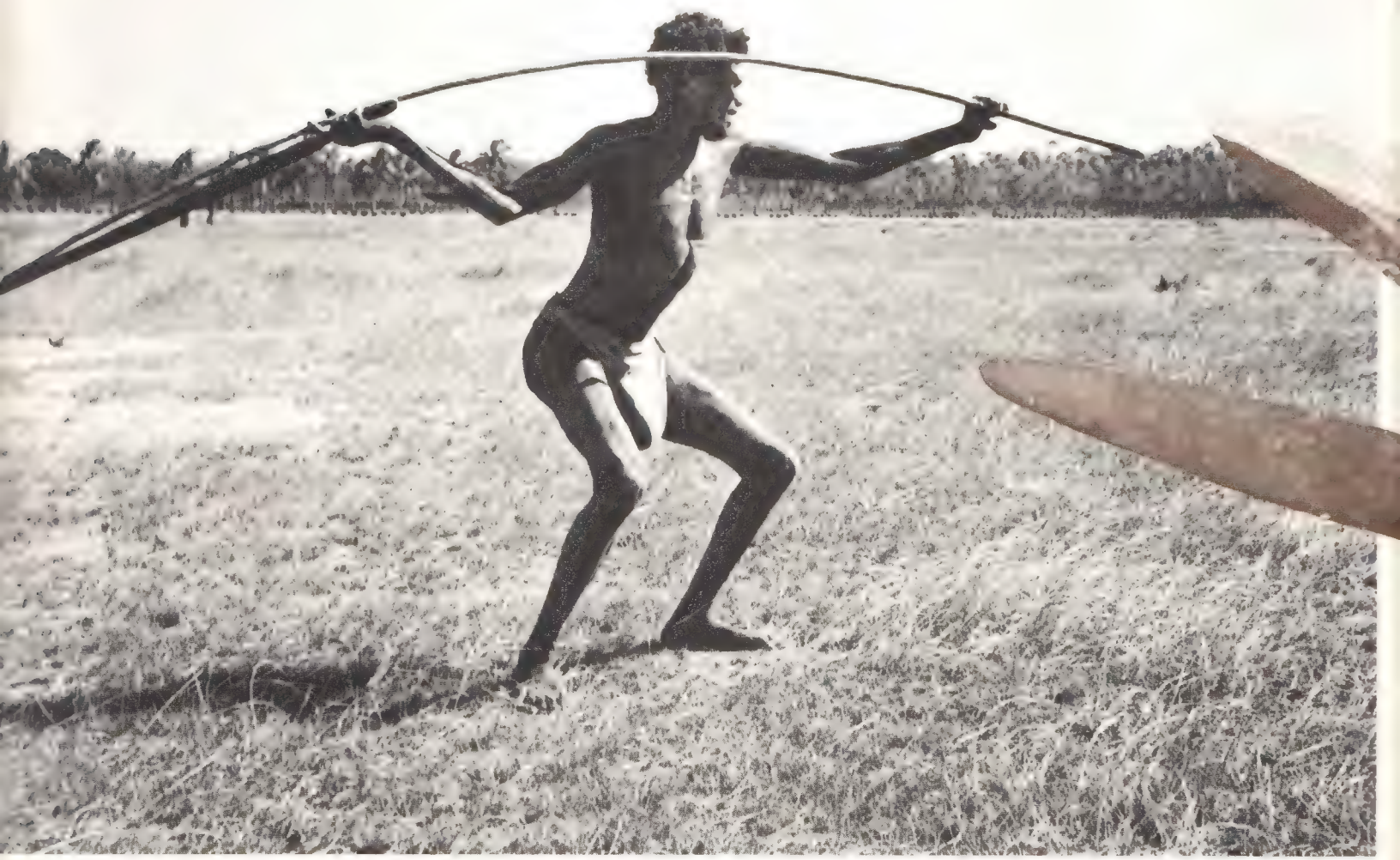
This old man smokes a pipe lit for him by a wife – one of 14 – who squats behind him. Traditionally, the indigenous tobacco was smoked through half a crab's claw.

An Aborigine stands poised in his dug-out canoe, fishing-spear at the ready. The spears, which often have multiple points to ensure a hit, are male weapons. Women use nets and lines.

The Versatile Hunter

Though both men and women may catch small animals, the men are the big-game hunters. They are rarely seen without their spears – made, as these pictures show, of a wide variety of materials – and throwing-sticks or boomerangs. The latter are thrown spinning through the air, to hit the animal on the first bounce. (Contrary to popular belief the returning boomerang is only a plaything.)

The Aborigine's skill as a hunter is truly formidable. As he sidles up to his prey, he may avoid threatening behaviour by dragging his spear between his toes. He catches the over-curious emu by imitating it until it comes close enough for him to kill it. An Aborigine who swims well can catch unwary geese by dragging them under water by their feet. Even more bizarre, Aborigines in some areas plaster mud under their armpits to suppress any warning odour.



A hunter is about to launch his spear with his woomera or spear-thrower. A small hole at the base of the spear fits on to a slanted peg on the woomera, which acts as an extension to the man's arm, and enables him to throw the spear with much great accuracy and power.

Working carefully, a man winds thread, made from pandanus-tree fibres, round a sheath he is making for his flint spearhead. The sheath itself is made from eucalyptus paper bark and safeguards the sharp edges from damage during his travels.

A warrior proudly holds three spears and a woomera. The upper spearhead is made from the stings of stingrays, the middle one is of traditional flint and the lower is made of metal lvaged from a shot-down Japanese plane.

So-called "X-ray" paintings on bark, of a kangaroo and two emus, simulate the animals' skeletons. This style appears only in northern Australia.

A man starts a bark-painting of a fish, his own special totem. For paints he uses red and yellow ochre and white clay and charcoal mixed with water. His brush is made from a chewed twig end.

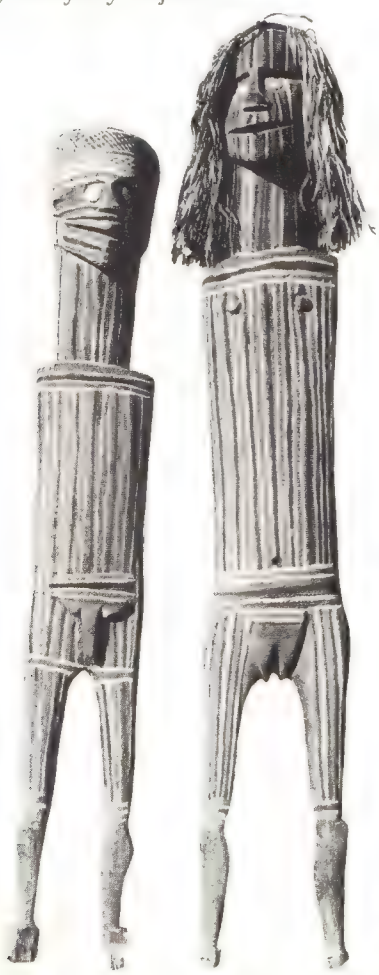
A Living Art

For centuries the Aborigines have been consummate artists, using stone axes and frayed sticks to inscribe rock, bark and wood. But the true depth and meaning of their art is revealed only through some understanding of their all-embracing but unsystematized beliefs.

To cope with an unpredictable environment, the Aborigines developed a complex belief in the continuing existence of ancient heroes who wandered over the land in a mythical "dreamtime," creating the spirits that live in objects, animate or inanimate. Every person is connected with a spirit, which Europeans, adapting the American Indian word, call his "totem." One of the ways the Aborigine keeps in contact with these helpful spirits is through art; for the artist, the painting actually *becomes* the totem or ancient hero.

Though a man may not kill or eat his own totem, others may. "X-ray" paintings, showing the internal structure of animals and birds, were probably drawn to increase the species magically – not for the benefit of the artist, but for other members of the tribe.

In addition to painting, Aborigines carve sacred ancestral figures, decorate sacred flat boards, and incise designs on musical instruments and even on ordinary, everyday objects.



These two sacred ancestral figures of wood may be seen only by men. Tradition laid down that women who saw them – even by mistake – had to be killed.

In this bark-painting by an Aborigine bard, a family of totemic frogs – mother (left) and six children (right and below) – are grouped round a father. The bard believed that the frog spirits, summoned by the act of painting, helped him compose songs while he slept.

The *ubar* drum, representing the mother-goddess's womb, is central to the *ubar* fertility rite.

Customs and Ritual

Aborigines believe that the only way they can survive is by keeping in close contact and on very good terms with the ancient heroes of the "dreamtime" through continual rituals and ceremonies.

For these rituals – like the *ubar* fertility ceremony shown here – the tribes gather in clans, set up according to each man or woman's totem.

Like most important rituals, the main part of the *ubar* ceremony is performed by men who, before being allowed to participate, have undergone painful initiation rites.

In most Aborigine tribes these rites take place in three stages. First the front teeth are knocked out. Then, a few years later, the boy is circumcised. Finally he is subincised, a custom unique to the Australian Aborigines in which the urethra is slit from its external opening back towards the scrotum. (When the wound heals, sexual capacity is left unimpaired.) After this the young man is fully instructed in ritual and may take a wife. Some tribes include scarring of the skin as part of the rites, but usually the incised designs are merely decorative.

Already painted herself, a woman meticulously decorates another with white clay in preparation for one of their own secret rituals.

In the characteristic resting position, a painted hunter wearing cockatoo feathers awaits the next stage in the *ubar* rites. The whole ceremony may last for weeks.

Wincing with pain, an Aborigine allows a knife to be drawn across his chest. The raised scar, produced by rubbing ashes or sand into the wound, will be considered a mark of great beauty.

II. The Great Exploration Race

Another explorer who set out to solve the river riddle was a German, Ludwig Leichhardt. In 1844 he departed from the Darling Downs in eastern Queensland at the head of a major expedition to the coast of Arnhem Land, 2,000 miles away in the extreme north of Australia: if there was a great river system there, then this expedition would surely not fail to find it.

Leichhardt, a Prussian, was born in 1813. He had fled from Germany (where he had studied medicine) in order to avoid military service. He arrived in Australia in 1841 and by 1843, after travelling alone in the New South Wales bush for 600 miles, he had acquired a solid reputation as a determined and dedicated explorer, even if he seemed somewhat vague and eccentric.

Leichhardt's ten-man expedition was privately financed and well-prepared. It left Jimbour Station, 60 miles west of Brisbane, on October 1, 1844 and it was soon in trouble.

The wet season had begun and as the heavily laden pack-animals slithered and sank in deep mud, valuable stores and provisions were lost or spoiled. Within two months there was a serious shortage of food, and the party was forced to live off the land. "Iguanas, opossums and birds of all kinds," Leichhardt wrote in his diary shortly before Christmas, "had for some time past been most gladly consigned to our stewing-pot, neither good, bad nor indifferent being rejected. The dried kangaroo meat, one of our luxuries, differed very little in flavour from the dried beef, and both, after long stewing, afforded us an excellent broth, to which we generally added a little flour. It is remarkable how man becomes indifferent to the niceties of food . . . the bare necessities of life form the only object of his desires."

The weeks that followed the first setbacks were generally undramatic and uneventful. Leichhardt had time to record every incident, day-to-day routines, the landscape, his companions and their habits and moods. His is the most complete journal of Australian exploration. In addition, he began to assemble a remarkably complete botanical collection.

But then, in June, when the expedition was long overdue at Arnhem Land, an event occurred that left the party in fear of their lives. They were suddenly attacked by Aborigines.

"They had doubtless watched our movements during the afternoon," Leichhardt wrote, "and marked the position of the different tents; and as soon as it was dark, sneaked upon us and threw a shower of spears. . . . Charley and Brown (two Aborigines with the expedition) and I discharged our guns into the crowd of natives, who instantly fled, leaving Roper and Calvert pierced with several spears. . . . Several of the spears were barbed, and could not be extracted without

"Bushmen" of the 1880s, tough Australian frontiersmen who developed the newly opened outback, followed hard on the heels of the explorers.

Bushmen fight off an Aborigine attack. The "mateship" formed under such conditions as these became celebrated as an Australian trait.

difficulty. I had to force one through Roper's arm . . . and to cut another out of Mr. Calvert's groin."

Then, while crossing a flooded stream, the expedition lost a horse that was carrying Leichhardt's unique and carefully assembled botanical collection: "Tears were in my eyes when I saw one of the most interesting results of my expedition vanish into smoke," he wrote. Nevertheless the expedition reached safety at Port Essington, in the far northwest, in the first week of December, 1845.

Although Leichhardt failed to find a northern river system, his expedition opened up the future state of Queensland. He won great fame, was awarded many honours and was even pardoned by the Prussian government for fleeing the country. But he was still young and ambitious and he was conspicuously out of his element in sophisticated Sydney, where he settled briefly. In 1848 he set out again to cross the continent from east to west. This time he disappeared forever.

No identifiable trace of Leichhardt, his six companions, their equipment and animals has ever been found. But for decades after Leichhardt's disappearance, there were rumours about a crazed white man who lived in the bush with natives and spoke a European language. Dozens of parties were sent out to search for the lost expedition. "Leichhardt relics" have supposedly been found scattered all over the continent: in 1938, a cattleman found seven skeletons grouped as though round a camp-fire on the edge of the Simpson Desert. An attempt was made to link them to Leichhardt, but the evidence was far from conclusive. As late as 1953, an expedition was sent from Perth to the Rawlinson Ranges in the heart of Western Australia in search of a legendary iron box, believed to be Leichhardt's medicine-chest, which, it was said, was held in great awe by Aborigines. Nothing was ever found, however.

The search for a great northern river system had meanwhile been pursued by the indefatigable Sir Thomas Mitchell, who was determined to succeed where Sturt had failed and to outdo Leichhardt, who was then on his way to Port Essington. Mitchell mounted an enormous expedition, complete with two iron boats, and set out from Sydney, in blistering heat, in late 1845. On October 1, 1846, he arrived at a river which he firmly believed flowed northwards into the Gulf of Carpentaria. "This river seemed to me typical of God's Providence, in conveying living waters into a dry parched land," he wrote. "It was with sentiments of devotion, zeal, and loyalty, that I therefore gave this river the name of my gracious sovereign, Queen Victoria."

Mitchell was convinced that this was his crowning achievement: but all he had discovered were the upper waters of Cooper's Creek, which flowed west to Lake Eyre. In 1858 the Victoria was renamed, with somewhat less pretension, the Barcoo River.

After Mitchell's failure, adventuring into the interior ceased for 14 years. Then in early 1860, the cities of Adelaide and Melbourne were gripped by a mood of remarkably schoolboyish excitement – "The Great Australian Exploration Race" was about to begin.

The South Australian government in Adelaide, anxious to explore the country beyond the salt lakes and, possibly, to open up a route to the ports in the north, had offered a prize of £2,000 to the first to cross the continent south to north. The Melbourne expedition was planned on a more lavish scale. It was sponsored by the Royal Society of Victoria and backed by private and public funds to the unheard-of amount of £12,000 – nothing was spared to find the best men, animals – including camels – and equipment.

Two rival expeditions assembled. The South Australian party was led by a

tenacious 45-year-old Scottish immigrant, John McDouall Stuart, who had accompanied Sturt on his attempt to reach the centre and who was considered to be one of the most capable explorers in the country. His privately financed and modestly equipped party left Adelaide in November 1859.

At the head of the Melbourne expedition was Robert O'Hara Burke, a tall, strong, black-bearded, wildly romantic, 39-year-old Irishman, who had come to Australia in search of gold. Having failed to find wealth, he had become first a police inspector, and later a magistrate.

Stuart was the first to move, leaving his base at Chamber's Creek on March 2, 1860, for the centre of the continent. Within a few weeks he had penetrated farther into "the ghastly blank" than anyone had considered possible. On April 12, Stuart reached the MacDonell Ranges (near which the town of Alice Springs now stands) and, ten days later, found himself sitting back to record his arrival at the centre of the continent:

"Today I find . . . that I am now camped in the centre of Australia. I have marked a tree and planted the British flag there. There is a high mount about two miles and a half to the north-north-east. I wish it had been in the centre; but on it tomorrow I will raise a cone of stones, and plant the flag there, and name it 'Central Mount Sturt'." (It was later, confusingly, renamed Central Mount *Stuart*.) This he did, and then "placed a pole with the British flag nailed to it. Near the top of the cone I placed a small bottle, in which there is a slip of paper, with our signatures to it, stating by whom it was raised. We then gave three hearty cheers for the flag, the emblem of civil and religious liberty. May it be a sign to the natives that the dawn of liberty, civilization and Christianity is about to break upon them."

Stuart continued the race to the north under increasingly gruelling conditions. Supplies were now very scarce; there had been no rain since March; Stuart's health had begun to deteriorate seriously; and the party was constantly harassed by Aborigines. On June 27, he and his companions were in tatters, wretchedly thin and pitifully weak from exposure. They turned back, reaching Adelaide in October. There Stuart learned that Burke's expedition had left Melbourne on August 20 amid scenes of unprecedented jubilation.

The entire city had turned out to cheer: Burke's men were heroes before they even began. The Mayor addressed the departing convoy with stirring words of encouragement and ended: "I will not detain you; but for this great crowd, and on behalf of the colony of Victoria at large, I say: God speed you!"

Burke replied: "No expedition has ever started under such favourable circumstances. We shall never do well till we justify what you have done for us, by showing you what we can do."

And no expedition in Australian history was so ill-starred.

Burke was the wrong man for the job: he was as courageous as he was ambitious, but he was woefully inexperienced in bushcraft, and his violent temper and shifting, unpredictable moods quickly alienated him from his men. Within a few weeks, three of them, including the Medical Officer, had left the party and turned back in white fury.

Burke also had an uncanny ability to make fatally wrong snap-decisions. At Menindee, on the Darling River near Broken Hill, he hired the ex-manager of a near-by sheep-station, a man called Wright, to guide the expedition to Cooper's Creek, 360 miles to the north-west. Then he divided the slow convoy into two sections, leaving half at Menindee to follow on later, and proceeded at a faster pace towards Cooper's Creek. Halfway there, he ordered Wright to turn back and bring up the rest of the convoy while he and the party continued on to the Creek, where they would all meet.

Burke reached Cooper's Creek in November and waited. The temperature rose to 140 degrees in the sun, the water was putrid, they were plagued by rats, supplies were dwindling, and day after day passed without any sign of Wright. Finally, Burke decided to wait another 48 hours and not a minute longer. When Wright failed to appear at the end of that time, Burke's temper boiled – and he made his worst decision. Expecting Wright to arrive shortly, he split his eight-man party once again, leaving half of it camped at the Creek, while he and his second-in-command, William Wills, a 26-year-old immigrant from Devon, and two other men, Charles Gray and John King, set out to finish the race.

The four men left Cooper's Creek on December 16, 1860. On the last day of January, 1861, Burke suddenly accused Gray and King of hampering progress, and ordered them to camp where they were while he and Wills raced on to the Gulf of Carpentaria. On February 11, after tearing and hacking their way through miles of deep mangrove swamp, they found themselves standing ankle deep in mud that left their boots and trousers stained with salt. Still sunk in the mangrove swamp, they turned to each other and shook hands. "We reached the sea," Burke recorded, "but we could not obtain a view of the ocean although we made every endeavour to do so."

The two men then rejoined Gray and King, and set out for Cooper's Creek on February 13. Rations were now at starvation level: in desperation they ate a snake, but its poison made them terribly ill. Gray suffered the most, and he died somewhere in the Stony Desert.

Delaying a few hours to bury Gray's body, the party pressed on and reached Cooper's Creek on April 21. The camp was deserted.

Burke threw himself to the ground in a rage, shouting betrayal. Wills looked around the camp and discovered, nailed to a tree, a piece of wood with the message: "Dig 8 ft. W.[est] Ap.[ril] 21."

Wills and King dug and found provisions and a letter informing Burke that the depot party had left for Menindee, as Wright's supplies had not arrived. The letter, dated April 21, 1861, had been written a few hours before Burke's return. As he recorded in a single-line journal entry: "Arrived at the depot this evening, just in time to find it deserted."

Wills tried to persuade Burke to follow and overtake the party, but Burke flatly refused: he had decided on making straight for Adelaide. On the following day, he wrote a letter "To Whom It May Concern": "We proceed on, tomorrow, slowly down the creek towards Adelaide. We are very weak. The two camels are done up, and we shall not be able to travel faster than four or five miles a day. Gray died on the road, from exhaustion and fatigue. We have suffered much from

McDouall Stuart proudly plants the British flag in the centre of the continent in 1860 to show natives that "liberty, civilization and Christianity are about to break upon them."

hunger. We have discovered a practicable route to Carpentaria. We are greatly disappointed," he concluded, "at finding the party here gone."

The letter was buried with the cache, and the ground carefully smoothed over to hide it from Aborigines: foolishly – for when a search-party arrived to look for the overdue expedition, they found no evidence that Burke and Wills had ever arrived at the Creek.

The three men set out on April 23. After a few weeks of hopeless trudging in the desert, Burke changed his course, and ordered Wills back to the Creek to leave instructions for the search-party he supposed must be on the way. Wills wrote: "Both camels are dead and our provisions are exhausted. . . . We are trying to live the best way we can, like the blacks, but find it hard work. . . . The depot party having left, contrary to instructions, has put us in this fix."

By the end of June, the men were hopelessly lost and starving to death. Wills, by now back with the party and too weak to move, persuaded Burke and King to go in search of help. On June 29, Wills wrote in his journal with admirable stoicism:

"I am weaker than ever. Nothing now but the greatest good luck can save any of us. As for myself, I may live four or five days, if the weather is warm. My pulse is at 48, and very weak. . . . I can only look out, like Mr. Micawber, for 'something to turn up'." Nothing did turn up. This was the last entry before his death.

Burke collapsed a few miles away. Before he died, he wrote in his small memorandum-book: "I hope we shall be done justice to. We have fulfilled our task, but we have been aban . . ." He paused for a moment, perhaps controlling an urge to lash out in recrimination, and then wrote on more calmly: "We have not been followed up as expected. King has behaved nobly. He stayed with me to the last." Then he turned to King and said: "I hope you will remain with me till I am quite dead. . . . But when I am dying, it is my wish . . . that you leave me unburied where I lie." The next morning he was dead.

King wandered aimlessly in the desert until he fell in with a group of Aborigines, in whose curious and protective company he lived, a lonely figure in scarecrow rags and part of a hat, until he was found by the search-party in September, 1861.

A long Commission of Inquiry followed. Wright and Brahe, the leader of the depot party, were the natural targets for blame by the outraged Melbourne population. In fact, both men had obviously had uneasy consciences, since they had joined forces and returned to Cooper's Creek in search of Burke and Wills on May 8.

In the end the Commission blamed everyone. But the people of Melbourne could not accept the idea that £12,000 had been squandered on sham heroes. The bodies of Burke and Wills were taken out of the desert and brought to Melbourne where they were carried through the streets in a state funeral that blotted out forever the now painful memory of the scenes of hysterical joy that had accompanied their departure.

Burke and Wills were credited with the honour of having won the race, but otherwise the costly and elaborate expedition was an absolute disaster. Interestingly, it is those who failed to achieve their original aims, or those who died – Eyre and Leichhardt, and above all, Burke and Wills – who are the dominant figures in Australian exploration.

DISASTER AT COOPER'S CREEK

Nothing marred the joyful optimism of the Melbourne crowds who, on August 20, 1860, watched Robert O'Hara Burke as he set out to find a north–south route across Australia.

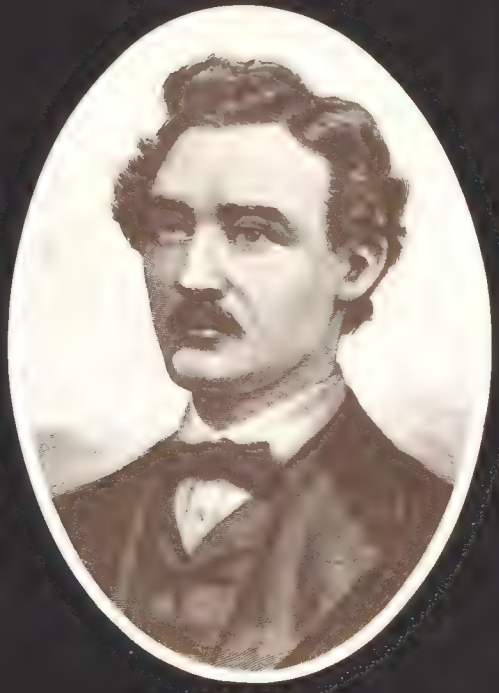
After all, it was the biggest and best-equipped expedition in the history of Australian exploration: £9,000 had been spent on 27 camels from India, 23 horses, carts that could double up as barges and 60 gallons of rum.

Burke, brave but inexperienced, was supported by trained scientists – George Neumayer, Herman Beckler and Ludwig Becker, whose drawings recorded the expedition. Eleven other men, including John King and William Wills, made up the full number who rode towards their base camp at Cooper's Creek, 700 miles away.

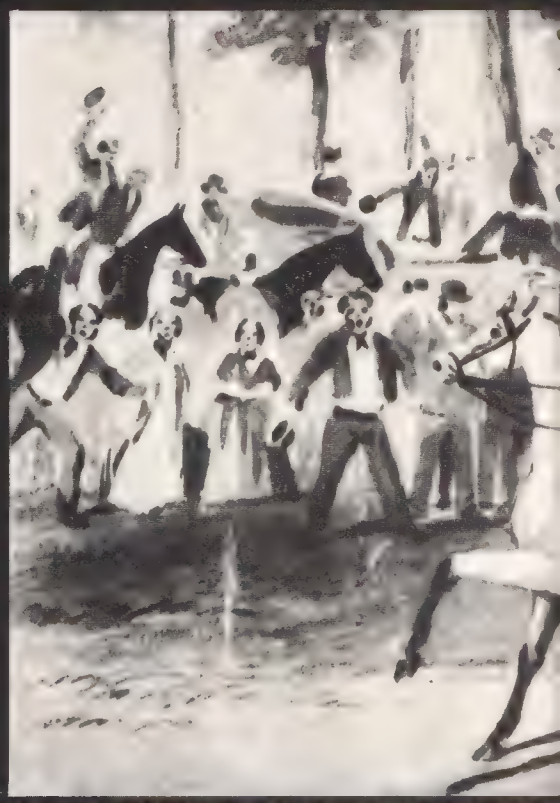
Ironically, this auspicious start was the prelude to the most disastrous journey in Australian exploration.

Robert O'Hara Burke

William John Wills



John King



Burke, riding his "pretty little grey, Billy," which he

Dr Ludwig Becker, naturalist to the expedition, drew

and his starving companions were eventually to eat, triumphantly leads his expedition out of Royal Park, Melbourne, to the cheers of the crowds.

this sketch of the marching caravan. The peevish camels on the left were separated from the nervous horses; Burke is between the two columns.

Discord and Fatal Errors

By the time the expedition reached Menindee, half-way to Cooper's Creek, Burke's high-handed manner had so angered three of the older members of the team that they resigned in fury.

Burke hired replacements from the farms he passed along the way. One of them was the lazy William Wright whom Burke impulsively – and fatally – decided to put in charge of half of the expedition and the bulk of the supplies. Wright, Burke now resolved, was to follow him on at a slower pace to the proposed camp at Cooper's Creek.

Burke and his party took 23 days to reach the Creek. There he set up a depot under large shady trees, near to water that was foul-tasting, but plentiful and full of fish.

Burke now made his second bad mistake. He decided not to wait for Wright but to split the party up once more and push on north with Wills, King and a new man, Charles Gray, leaving William Brahe and three others to wait for Wright. Burke was confident that he would return in three months.

Meanwhile, Wright, instead of following directly, was dawdling in Menindee, unwilling to start until his job was confirmed by Melbourne. He was further deterred by the fate of a messenger to the depot who, in spite of being guided by a native tracker, nearly died en route.

Aborigines hovering round the depot were always ready to snatch anything left unattended.

Burke, Wills, King and a newcomer, Charles Gray

The Aborigine tracker, Dick, guided a mission to deliver letters to Burke at Cooper's Creek.

Central Australian rats immediately devoured any

one of those taken on at Menindee – bid farewell to the men left at Cooper's Creek. Burke then headed north, ignoring advice against midsummer travel.

food at the depot that was not hung from trees.

Flocks of central Australian pigeons continuously circled round the bored men at the Creek.

Triumph and Tragedy

The expedition reached its goal, the Gulf of Carpentaria, in seven weeks, doggedly ignoring the dry summer heat of the Stony Desert and the heavy rains of the tropical regions. But the enervating conditions had taken their toll. On the return journey, in spite of the men's courage, they were increasingly slowed, first by exhaustion and then by lack of provisions. It was too much for Gray, who died on April 17, 1861.

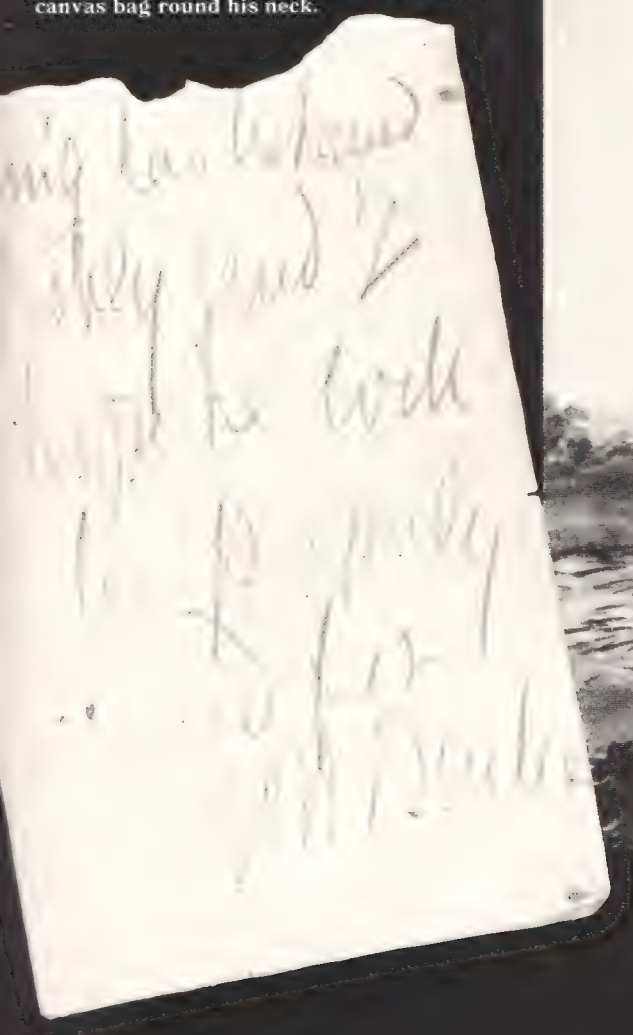
The survivors limped painfully back to Cooper's Creek a month behind schedule, to find it empty. Brahe had left a few hours before.

As Wills was now too weak to travel, he persuaded the other two to leave him to seek help among the Aborigines, little guessing that a rescue-party was already on the way.

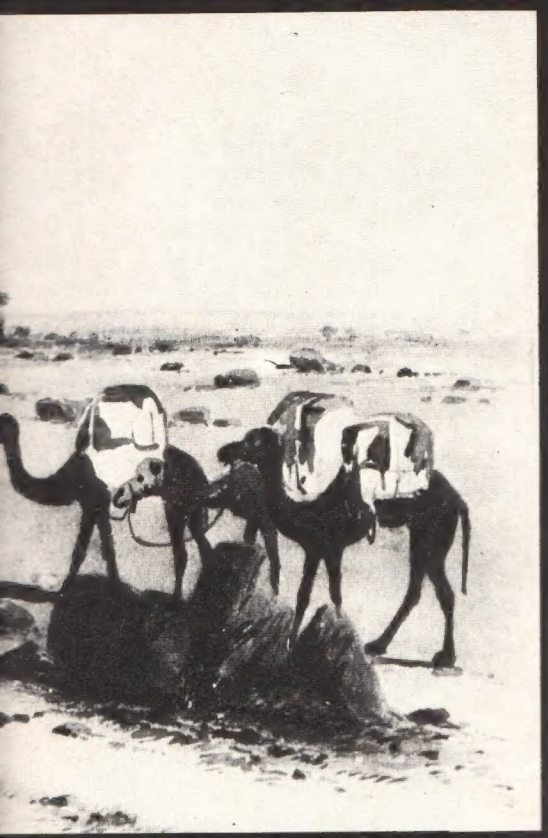
They did not get far before Burke collapsed and died. John King survived with the help of the Aborigines until the rescuers arrived. This tragic end to the expedition gained it a pre-eminent place in Australian folklore and acted as an inspiration for several Australian artists, like S. T. Gill, who drew these scenes.

On the way north, Burke's party found the Stony Desert "far from bad travelling ground," though its

Scrawled disjointedly in pencil, Burke's last note was, together with Wills's last effects, carried to safety by King in a little canvas bag round his neck.



King leans weakly over the dead Burke, whose last wish was that his body be left unburied.



rough terrain had daunted an earlier explorer.

Starving and exhausted, the three travellers find the note showing they had just missed Brahe.

The Aborigines who befriended King point excitedly to the approaching rescue-party. Without their help, King would certainly have died.

III. The End of the Dream

The great failures of Australian exploration so caught the public imagination that the one expedition to open up a practicable route to the north was overshadowed. This was a renewed attempt by Stuart to achieve his goal.

Stuart left Adelaide for the second time on November 29, 1860, and by January, 1861, he had covered 400 miles. But again he was defeated: his party became disastrously ill with scurvy and dysentery, exhaustion and exposure – Stuart could take them no farther than he had been before, and in April, with a deeply felt sense of humiliation, he turned round.

When he arrived back in Adelaide in September, 1861, he was astonished to learn that the Burke and Wills expedition was now long overdue and that the search-party had been sent out to find them. He did not wait to hear the results: he quickly organized yet another expedition and within four weeks he was off again for the third time. And he succeeded.

Nine months later he reached the sea east of Darwin. On July 24, 1862, he recorded, "I dipped my feet, and washed my face and hands in the sea. . . . Thus have I, through the instrumentality of Divine Providence, been led to accomplish the object of the expedition, and take the whole party safely as witnesses to the fact."

He arrived back in Adelaide in December and found the city in mourning: on that day the bodies of Burke and Wills had arrived there on their way to Melbourne to be buried. Stuart's health had collapsed completely on the way back to Adelaide: when he died in England four years later, he was almost totally blind and he had lost much of his memory.

It still remained for others to fill in the many gaps on the map of Australia's interior, the vast, inhospitable outback. A decade later, Ernest Giles, who had been born in Bristol in 1835 and had emigrated to Australia in 1850, twice crossed half the continent travelling from Adelaide to Perth and back again. His course ran parallel to Eyre's, but 150 miles inland in the Nullarbor Desert. His return journey took him even farther inland, through the vast Gibson Desert of Western Australia. In 1876 he wrote: "The history of Australian exploration, though not yet quite complete, is now so advanced towards its end that only minor details are now wanting to fill the volume up; and though I shall not attempt to rank myself among the first, or the greatest, yet I think I have reason to call myself the last, of the Australian explorers." But he was too late to find lasting honour. Though in 1880 Giles was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society, it was his only reward: he died in 1897, forgotten and in poverty, as a £150-a-year clerk in the gold-fields at Coolgardie.

Australia no longer needed explorers. Their work had been superseded by the overlanders, the men who sometimes became fabulously rich by driving herds of cattle and mobs of sheep into newly opened up territory and to towns where meat-supplies were scarce. A writer in 1847 described them as being "rough, dirty, half-shaven and ill-attired. The stranger would look upon them as of small repute in society and as ignorant and poor. He would be surprised to learn that these men could tell down their £20,000; that they claim kindred with the nobility of Britain . . . and are versed in the literature of all ages."

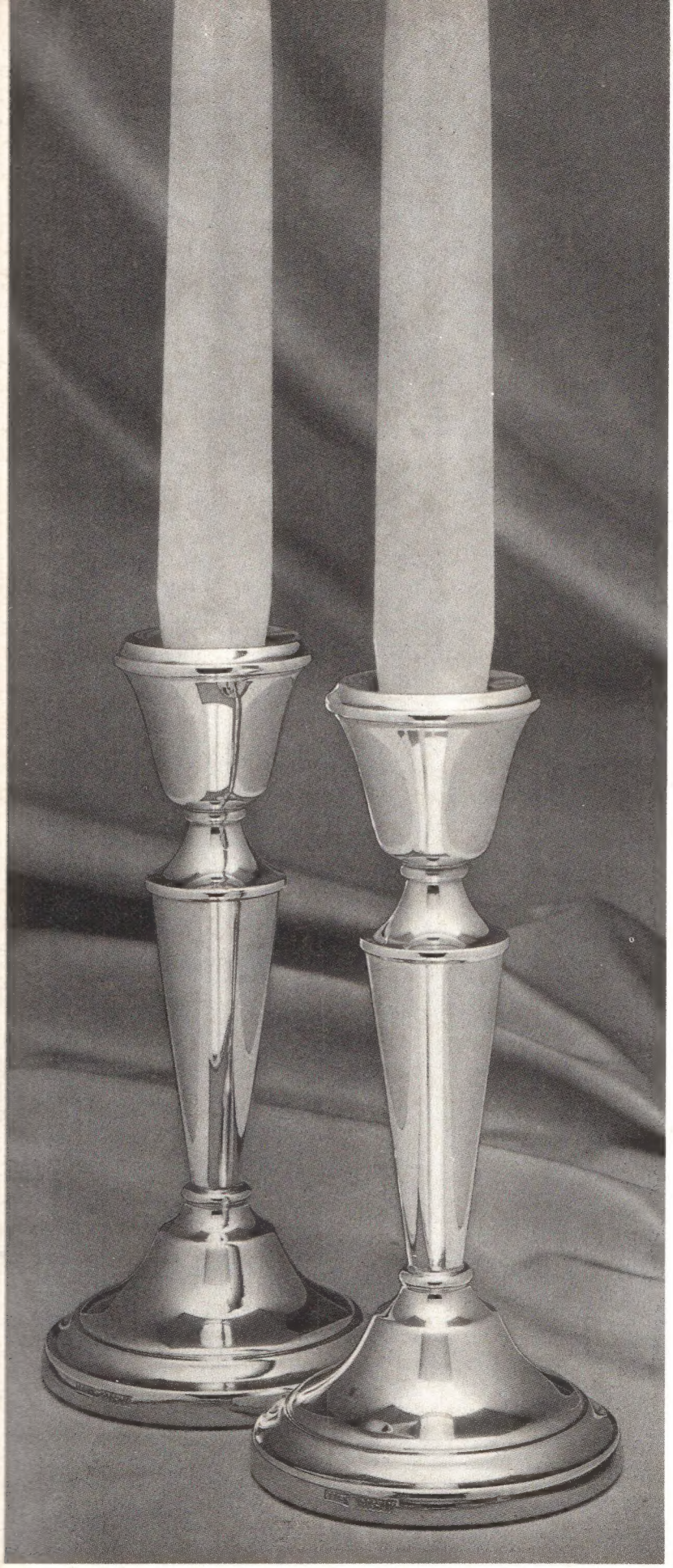
Later, many of them – such as Joseph Hawdon, Charles Bonney and Patrick Durack – and their families would rank among Australia's leading citizens. Durack arrived in Australia in 1853, joined the gold-rushes, found gold and invested his money in cattle-stations near Cooper's Creek. In 1883, the Durack family started out from Cooper's Creek to drive 8,000 head of cattle 2,500 miles overland across little-known country to the Kimberleys, in the north-west of Western Australia: it was to become Australia's classic overlanding story. On their epic two-year journey, they survived floods and drought, disease and stampedes, and attacks from Aborigines. They arrived with half of their original herd, but that was more than enough to found their most successful cattle empire.

Elsewhere in Australia, now with a swelling population of more than a million, settlers were occupying the best of the wheat- and wool-growing regions discovered by the explorers decades before: by 1860 most of the good country in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, was settled.

By the turn of the century, the map was complete, except for the 30,000 square miles of the waterless Simpson Desert, which had defeated Stuart, and perhaps Leichhardt. The Simpson was first crossed in 1936. A station-owner called Edmund Colson, accompanied by an Aborigine boy, made the trip from Blood's Creek, 450 miles north-west of Lake Eyre, to Birdsville, in 16 days. When Colson arrived in Birdsville after his 260-mile journey, the townspeople were so astonished that they were inclined to disbelieve his claim. So, after a short rest, he saddled his camels, and went back home to Blood's Creek, across the desert.

There was no land left to discover, but the legend of *something* in the centre persisted – certainly not a sea, but perhaps gold. This was mainly due to the remarkable story of "Lassetter's Lost Reef." Harry Lassetter was a prospector who claimed that he had discovered a phenomenally rich vein of gold in the mountains of central Australia. He managed to convince prominent Sydney businessmen of the authenticity of his vein, and £5,000 was raised to mount an expedition, which set out from Alice Springs in July, 1930. It was a full-scale technical undertaking – with cars, trucks and even an aeroplane. But the cars and trucks failed, and the plane crashed: and Lassetter found himself alone in the desert on a camel. According to the barely decipherable scraps of a diary found later near his body, he rediscovered and pegged the reef. Then, lost, with no more provisions and little hope of relief, he followed and tried to join a tribe of Aborigines. He stayed with them for some months, apparently as a very unwelcome guest. His exact end is unknown: he probably died of starvation, although his papers hint that "the bone" had been pointed at him – that he was a victim of witchcraft. From the descriptions he left, it was calculated that the lode was less than a five days' ride away: but, although for years afterwards expeditions were sent out to locate it, nothing was ever found. If there really is an El Dorado in the heart of Australia, it still remains to be discovered.

The Royal Irish Regiment (18th Foot), 1892



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